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THE RENEWAL OF FRENCH THOUGHT ON THE EVE OF THE WAR

By ALBERT SCHINZ,
French Department, Smith College, Northampton, Mass

Some time ago, a French critic, Mr. Blum, in a striking article in *La Revue de Paris*, wrote to the following effect: French thought since the time of the Revolution has evolved according to a great curve which to-day returns to its starting point, thus forming a vast circle. We stand to-day almost exactly where our ancestors stood about a century ago after the transition period ending with the fall of Napoleon and beginning with the Restoration in 1814 and 1815. Artists, poets, writers, philosophers of that age had assumed an attitude of protest against that rationalism and scepticism which was the characteristic of the eighteenth century. Now our artists, our poets, our writers, our philosophers of the present age show the same disposition towards the Rationalism—or, we sometimes call it Realism, the word does not matter—which is the characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century. A wave of idealism, of religiosity, sweeps the world of thought almost as if nothing had happened during the last hundred years. Our generation is ready for the *Méditations* of a new Lamartine, for the *Poèmes Bibliques* of a new Vigny, for the *Confessions* of a new Musset, for the *Contemplations* of a new Victor Hugo.

And indeed, to-day we have already witnessed much more than was announced in that curious prophecy. Some of those who are unmistakably the standard-bearers of the morrow have offered *more* than the Romanticism of a hundred years ago, *more* than the vague "tourment de l'infini" of Vigny

and Musset, *more* than the semi-pagan religiosity of Lamartine, *more* than the agnostic spiritualism of Victor Hugo, *more* even than the merely esthetic Christianity of Chateaubriand, or the rationalistic Protestantism of Madame de Staël. This is no less than the traditional Catholicism of France, which is now revived in the writings of some of the prophets of the younger generation, the orthodox Catholicism of the priest, the Catholicism of the repenting sinner, the Catholicism of the France which had been honored by the title of "Eldest daughter of the Church." And therefore,—one ought to emphasize it too—this is *more* than the pseudo-Catholicism of a Huysmans, or of a Maeterlinck; those two men, who at most may be called precursors, but nothing more, are already far behind.

And this thoroughgoing change has taken place with an astounding rapidity.

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Of course the attempts had been made before to lead into new channels the thoughts of the youth of France. Such eloquent and clever and subtle writers as Brunetière, Bourget, and Lemaitre had been earnestly suggesting: "Let us go back to Rome." But, who was listening, and who heard them? Only a limited number of people belonging to the sheeplike class, and who did so because they always feel a vague fright at whatever progressive theories might disturb their bourgeois quietude. When followed by others, moreover, these men were followed because of their fame rather than because of their ideas. And indeed, is it not remarkable that the call of men standing so high in public esteem did *not* appeal for so long a time to these younger people on whom the ideal of the future depends? . . . While today, all at once, with practical unanimity, a whole generation, all that is young and strong and hopeful, rushes with enthusiasm into the new path—no! this is wrong: into the path that had been deserted by the class called the "intellectuels"!

The movement was as general as it was rapid. It stands to reason that such a change would not be confined to literature.

It found a fertile soil in the domain of arts, for example. Futurists and cubists have created quite a stir. But people of wisdom have remarked long ago that drums make noise because they are empty. *Others* were toiling who touched the hearts, and their work stands out calm and beautiful after the loud uproar over sensational products has subsided. As we know, there are usually at each Salon in Paris, one or

two paintings which seem to focus the interest of the visitors and arouse discussion. At the last Salon d'Automne before the war—which was held in 1913—one of these pictures singled out, as if instinctively, by the public was an “Annonciation” by Maurice Denis. Denis was already the painter of “L'exaltation de la croix” and has reminded many people of the sweet and pure conceptions of Fra Angelico. Another picture admired and discussed was Georges Desvallières' “Le bon larron”: it is the old scene of the Crucifixion; the “bon larron” is casting a glance full of gratitude towards a livid Christ, while the hideous face of the “mauvais larron” betrays the great terror suggested by the moral suffering of the sinner; Desvallières reminds one of the school of those Gothic painters who emphasize the torments of the religious soul. The interpretation of the two artists is certainly different, almost in opposition; still each is the interpretation of one and the same idea: the Christian idea, the Catholic idea.

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And why should we not speak here of Rodin, up to now the incomparable sculptor of physical forces, of the chaotic power of the universe, and who, just a few months before the European conflagration, seizes a pen and feels that he has something to say? What sort of inspiration is going to take hold of the Goethe of sculpture? His work bears the titles *Les Cathédrales de France*—a prophet's book, one might almost say, especially in these pages where he sings a song of piety to the beauty and to the sanctity of the cathedral of Reims. He was the man, if any, who could give it back to us a little by his stirring description.

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Being so widely known, short mention only is necessary here of the great idealistic movement in philosophy, and which has been more or less aptly baptized “Bergsonism.” Let us say here, however, that at the beginning Bergson himself, as if he was not aware of the deep renewal of thought of which he was made the chief representative, had remained very cautious both in his books and his lectures. For years he was satisfied with a purely negative attitude: he rebuked the haughtiness of scientists, and denounced the shortcomings of a popular rationalism, that was all; after a while he consented to walk hand in hand with the representatives of a rational pragmatism; and finally it was in his New York lectures that he made his first positive utterances regarding God, freedom

of the will, and immortality—lectures, which, by the way, were never published. The last we have from him before the war is an interview of about one year ago; when he admitted to a Jesuit Father, the Père de Tonquedec: “De mon oeuvre se dégage nettement l'idée d'un Dieu créateur et libre.” (The logical inference from my works is plainly the idea of a creating and free God.)

And is it not remarkable that the wise man of Serignan,¹ the great God-fearing naturalist, J.-H. Fabre, greatly admired long ago by Darwin, but who had remained almost completely ignored except by a very small circle of specialists in entomology, should have become *suddenly* in recent years a world celebrity? Scientific associations were now eager to honor him, the President of the French Republic paid a solemn visit to him in his retreat—and last but not least, it is from him that Bergson borrowed the most striking arguments in support of a non-materialistic universe (in his last volume, *L'évolution créatrice*).

* * *

The same attitude prevails with recent critics in various domains.

It may be simply a matter of coincidence that one of the greatest works in the field of literary criticism and erudition, just completed, should bring back an interpretation, more religious even than that of the very catholic Léon Gautier, to account for the origin of the great national French epics—*La Chanson de Roland* and others—: we refer to the theories of Joseph Bédier, of the Collège de France, in his imposing *Légendes Épiques*; the French epics, according to him, are simply pilgrim songs. . . . This happens at the very moment when the famous abbé Loisy, elected to a chair of the University of Paris to profess, unhampered by the Church, his liberal and anticlerical views, falls more and more into oblivion.

It may be a matter of coincidence too, but just at this time cannot well escape notice, that while erecting a monument to the most enthusiastic disciple of the Renaissance, Rabelais, in the form of an elaborate edition of his works, the great scholar Abel Lefranc, right beside the one to Rabelais, erects another monument to Calvin in publishing a new edition of the *Institution Chrétienne*. A luxurious edition of Stendhal's works, now in process of publication, is at present widely advertised in Paris; but for one very

¹ He died in the first year of the war.

profane author, how many Catholic authors, whose works are also published anew, and receive a generous welcome back to fame by our generation, Joseph de Maistre, Hello, Lamennais, Montalembert, etc.!

It is a matter of mere coincidence perhaps also, that just last year there should have been a demand for a new edition of Schuré's profoundly mystical book, *Les Grands Initiés*, and that one of the first volumes edited in the modern popular collection Nelson—and one of those which sells best—should be that exquisite *Introduction à la Vie Dévote* by Saint-François de Sales . . . Saint-François—and this other remarkable boom of the other Saint-François, the great Saint-François, Saint-François, d'Assise: A Frenchman started it, Paul Sabatier, who was followed by the Père Edouard d'Alençon, who was followed by the Dane Joergensen, who was followed again by a Frenchman, Lafenestre, of the French Institute, providing us with the volume needed for the public at large and which reads like a beautiful and elevating novel, *La Légende de Saint-François d'Assise*.

To a man who resists drawing hasty conclusions, it might seem a mere coincidence also that the *Vie de Jeanne d'Arc* which Anatole France chose to write in 1908 should be the first book by this idol of French letters to meet with a cold reception, while three years later Hanotaux, whose fame does not compare with that of France as a writer, and who claiming for the touching heroine the right to be "divine," opposed his Jeanne d'Arc to that of the great man, should score a success with his book.

* * *

And if all this were merely a matter of coincidence, it is *not* in any case a matter of coincidence that the winter before the war, the book of the season in France, the book that one must read, the book that everybody was talking about, was a *Saint-Augustin*. This literary event is truly typical of the change that has taken place in the philosophical attitude of the writers who find favor with the public.

The author of *Saint-Augustin*, Louis Bertrand, born a little over forty years ago, belongs to that élite of Frenchmen called the "Normaliens."² After he had completed his studies

² That is to say that he was at one time a pupil of the "Ecole Normale Supérieure" an institution where the French government provides all the necessities of life and the training by the very best professors of France for a few young men, winners in competitive examinations held yearly through France. The selection is made very

in Paris, he was sent as professor of literature to Algiers. He had written for his Doctor's degree on *La fin du classicisme et le retour à l'antiquité*. In Africa he became directly acquainted with the country and the remains of the civilization which had inspired the authors he had studied. The equatorial skies, the dazzling, yet soothing landscapes of the southern coast of the Mediterranean impressed him with their peculiar charm. He wrote novels, and books of travel filled with the inspiration of the "mirage oriental." And finally, combining his erudition with his love for African life he decided to revive with his pen the struggle of Christian civilization in Africa just before the fall of the Roman empire—a page of history strangely neglected by modern scholars. The result was that stirring book *Saint-Augustin*.

The reader cannot resist the charm of Bertrand's vision of those cities representing a civilization that has been wiped out of existence by historical events: Sagasta, the dwelling place of Augustin's parents, "douce et riant" like France; voluptuous Carthage, with a civilization more refined than that of Rome, and so full of danger for the pleasure-loving and intelligent student Augustin; the corrupted imperial Rome, with her mixture of people and races, and which in spite of her gilded temples and imposing buildings one could compare to a heap of manure feeding by its very rottenness the seed of Christianity; Milan, where the austere and keen Ambrosius persuaded the northern tribes who had invaded Italy to serve the Christian God, and where Augustin himself, the teacher of pagan rhetoric, opened finally his heart to the gospel of truth; Hippone, then, with her convent, and her girdle of walls, Hippone, witness of the holy life of the greatest of Christian bishops.

And how full of life is the picture of the household where the Christian hero spends his first years, where he saw the Christian woman, Monique, conquer the brutality of a husband and the acrimony of a harsh mother-in-law, "by dint of patience, sweetness of manners and charity." Later in the book, we have the anguish and the prayers of the same

much in the same manner as that of the Rhodes Scholars in English countries. The Ecole Normale is responsible for the training of a remarkable proportion of illustrious men in France. Many consider it a great blow to the prestige of the venerable school, however, that a few years ago it was decided that the Normaliens would no longer have their own classes, but simply attend the Sorbonne—thus leaving the school to provide only lodging, food, library and laboratories; *plus*, of course one thing which means very much, the daily intercourse with the picked youth of France in various fields of knowledge.

holy woman for the salvation of her beloved son; and after she has seen him conquered, in Milan, by the Man of Geneareth, her ecstatic death in Ostia. Nothing could be more lucid, more sober and more stirring than the chapter relating the final crisis, nothing more gloriously radiant than the picture of the famous scene of Christ calling in the Garden. And it takes indeed the best in the excellent French literary artist to lead a profane reader so smoothly through the different states of minds which were to bring Augustin at last to the Christian God: that is to say, from the religious atmosphere of the paternal household, through Manicheism, through neo-platonic scepticism, through agnosticism, finally to the Paulinian faith, at once strong, severe and human. All this is interesting.

But what is most interesting of all, is the spirit which animates the book. In vain would the reader try to discover traces of the sceptical and haughty attitude of the scholar which was the fashion yesterday; or of an author concerned merely with objective treatment, i. e., looking at it, as one might say, only from the outside; or, still less, of the purely rationalistic philosopher who would consider it a disgrace if he did not disintegrate by analysis all the feelings and emotions of his hero. On the contrary. It is with the most sympathetic curiosity that the author bends over his Saint Augustin—a sympathy so true and so sincere that he cannot help seeing another self in that man who has been tormented for so many years, longing and struggling, but who has found truth finally. Augustus lived sixteen times a hundred years ago, yet the problems which he faced, the anguish he went through were the same as ours. And the celestial happiness which he found may be ours too: "That life (of Augustin)—writes Mr. Bertrand—and the age that witnessed it, remind us of our own age and of ourselves. The recurrence of similar circumstances has brought about the recurrence of situations and characters of a similar nature. It is almost our portrait. We are extremely near concluding that at the present hour there is no more timely subject than Saint-Augustin." He goes on explaining: We live in an age when no thinking being can afford to assume a purely contemplative attitude towards life. No age more than ours needs to recall Christ's words: "I came not to send peace on the earth, but a sword"; and every one of us must, after having consulted his conscience, say a *Yes* or a *No*. So it was in the fourth century; so it was with Saint Augustin: "People hesitated

between the beliefs of yesterday and the faith of the morrow. Augustin was one of those who had the courage to choose, and who after having chosen this faith, proclaimed it without weakening."

Another feature of the book explains the unusual appeal it made to modern French readers. Mr. Bertrand recalls Pascal, who like Saint Augustin—and to a great extent a continuator of Saint Augustin—found all his religious inspiration in the fact that he was so completely overawed by the idea of God. But Mr. Bertrand explains why Pascal, although he lived only three centuries back, seems much farther from us than Saint Augustin who is sixteen centuries old. Pascal speaks first of all of an infinite God, and of a God who hates sin, of a God of justice and of austerity; while Saint Augustin's God is not alone just, not before all else austere; He is primarily good, He is tender, He is the Heavenly *Father*. Now, we are tired of the cold impersonality and impassibility of science, and the God of Pascal reminds us too much of that. Our hearts are thirsty for a God, but for a God who would be—if one may say so without sacrilege—like Saint Augustin's, more *human*: "The judgment passed by Pascal on our human fragility knows no sympathy. The God of Port-Royal has the stern face of the ancient's *Fatum*; He withdraws into the clouds above, and comes out only to save from perdition a miserable creature. In Augustin the attitude is tender, trusting, filial, and if one is harassed, one feels the thrill of an unconquerable hope. Instead of crushing man under the iron hand of the judge, he allows him to feel the hand of the father who has prepared everything long before for the feeble child who is coming. "O Lord, the comforts of Thy Pity received me, as I have heard from; and so the comforts of woman's milk was ready for me. For my mother and my nurses did not fill their own bosoms, but Thou, O Lord, by their means gavest me the food of infancy according to Thy ordinance." Then his heart melts, thus thinking of the maternal milk. The great doctor gives to his style the tone of simplicity, familiarity, and humility, in order to tell us of his first wailings, of his outbursts of anger and of his delights in the days of his infancy. He was a father himself, he knew because he had seen with his own eyes, how touching is a newly born child, and the mother who offers her breast . . ."

Nothing could appeal more to us, to us who believe that kindness and charity are the real remedies for the painful social problems which impose themselves on our attention from

all sides, than the words so full of human tenderness uttered by the great saint, words of adoration for the divine mother and for the celestial child, words which remind us that even for the formidable champion of God who inspired fear and trembling to his pagan enemies, religion means love.

Far from us be the idea of comparing Mr. Bertrand to Renan. But to bring home more forcibly the great change undergone in French thought, one may be allowed to recall that the literature which obtained with a former generation was reflected in the "Prayer on the Acropolis" of the great agnostic Renan, while to-day the man who pleases us is one who ends his book full of religious meditation with these beautiful words:

"And now, whatever this book may be worth, which has been planned and written in a spirit of veneration and love for the Saint, the great heart, the great intellect named Augustin, for this unique type of the Christian, for the most entire and the most admirable servant of God who has perhaps ever lived, the author can only repeat, full of humility, what the first biographer, the Bishop of Guelma said fifteen hundred years ago: "I beg most earnestly from the charity of those who read this book to unite with me in thanksgiving and blessing towards the Lord who has inspired me to make known this life to those present and to those absent . . . and who has given me strength to achieve it. Pray for me and with me that I may endeavor to follow in the steps of that peerless man, in whose company God has allowed me to live for such a long time."

* * *

We have devoted special attention to Bertrand's book because he has faced so squarely the issue: Which inspiration do we want in our literature and in our philosophy? that of a Renan and an Anatole France, namely simply a great keenness of intellect, or that of a Saint Augustin, who to intellectual keenness would add above all the sense of responsibility of a writer towards the reading public, satisfy the soul as well as purely human reason? But, if not stated in such unmistakable and absolute terms, we can well say that the same deep anxiety is back of all the really significant books in France these four or five years past.

Let us mention very rapidly, and without entering into as many details as we did for Bertrand, some of such books as seem to us to express best this new trend of thought. And to do this we need not at all stop to consider writers who have for years proclaimed the advisability of a return to Christian, or better to Catholic, ethics, René Bazin, author of *Le Blé qui Lève* (translated), or Paul Bourget, who did so

in all his novels from *Le Disciple* to the long novel published on the eve of the war, *Le Démon de Midi*, and since the war broke out in his novel, *Le Sens de la Mort* (1915). There are enough significant cases among those who (almost always abruptly) stepped forward to confess a change of views.

Surely one of the most interesting is Pierre Loti, who for so long had made use of his enchanted pen to lure us to despair; this man as he writes up his last pilgrimage to the land of Buddhistic resignation, pessimism and nihilism, inserts—they are the two last pages of his *Pèlerin d' Angkor* (1911, translated under the title of *Siam*)—this idea: And yet, I wish all this be not true: would it not be beautiful if, after all, *Christ* was right! This is not much, but as much as a veteran of the pen who has advocated all his life views so different can afford to offer. For the world at large, this page written by a Pierre Loti assumes enormous importance.

What we might call the most “sensational” case is that of Madame Juliette Adam, the remarkable woman who was quite a prominent figure during the Second Empire and the Third Republic, for years editor of the *Nouvelle Revue*, and whose seven volumes of *Memoirs* have been eagerly read on both sides of the ocean. Over thirty years ago (in 1883) Madame Adam had published a very militant novel of an entirely non-Catholic inspiration; boldly, in a decided tone of challenge, she had titled it *Païenne*; now in 1913 Madame Adam published another novel but which this time is called *Chrétienne*—which is given as a continuation of the first and gives an account of the conversion of the heroine from paganism to Catholicism, nay to militant Catholicism. Moreover the heroine in both novels is the authoress herself; they are not all the adventures of her exterior life which are told, but the adventures of her inner self—indeed she herself makes no secret about it. Surely one may differ as to the propriety of putting thus before the public one's own intimate self and doing it in such a dramatic way too; but the sincerity of Madame Adam cannot be doubted, and as she has always had in her the soul of an apostle, she may have considered it her duty to come forward as she has, in *Chrétienne*, in order to undo the harm she might have done with *Païenne*.

The third case we ought to record is that of Maurice Barrès—he is younger than the former writer but his remarkable mastery of style earned for him a very early fame, and since the war began he has had no equal in keeping up the spirits

of his countrymen by the miracles of his pen. When he was a young man he was what is called nowadays a free-lance in the domain of thought. His incisive prose lent a real fascination to his irreducible radicalism; but his keenness of intellect which allowed him to uncover at once interested aims under the most beautifully presented theories, made it appear unthinkable that he would ever be anything but a destructive genius. But this man too yielded to some unknown pressure of events or of opinion, and in 1913 he published a long novel, *La Colline Inspirée*, in which he bows before the formidable and mysterious inspiration from things beyond human comprehension—an inspiration which leads astray, at times, naïve and helpless souls, but remains sacred even then as long as it is sincere; moreover—and this shows how Barrès also not only speaks of religion, but of *orthodox Catholicism*—the Church is there to prevent men from going astray, for they get lost only if they try to walk by themselves. M. Barrès is from Lorraine: his book is the story of a religious schism that took place about forty years ago in this province where deep religiosity is traditional; Joan of Arc came from Lorraine. The leaders of the sect who *are* sincere adorers of God, take for divine inspiration, suggestions which are far from divine. In fact the hero of the story is a religious crank, and the sacred spark is veiled by gross and vulgar behavior; the book is very painful to read; but the attitude of the author is remarkable. Ten or twenty years ago the story (it is a real story, as said above) would have been used as a magnificent occasion to discredit religion; now in 1913—and by the sharp ironist Barrès too—it serves to defend religion. How is it that the story of a crank, entirely lacking in intelligence of the world, filled with a conceit of the most ridiculous sort, still can interest us? Because in this man there is one thing that is stronger than any amount of crudeness of intellect, of conceit, or absurdity—genuine aspiration towards the infinite. M. Barrès also wrote that book—which is an act even more than a book—*La Grande Pitié des Eglises de France*; all through it from the first page to the last, we are moved by his passionate pleading for the maintenance and the restoration of the old churches and monuments which express so well the real inspiration of the history of France.

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One may ask with some pertinence perhaps how we explain, if the dispositions are so different now in his country, the last novel of Anatole France, who never wrote anything

so bitter and violent against Christianity as *La Révolte des Anges* (1913). The answer is that we have in that senile product the natural outcome of all the philosophy of which he is a representative. And a man like Anatole France could not very well, at the end of a long career whose extraordinary success rested entirely on his talent as an ironical intellectualist, pass to the other side without risking the sensation of acting from feeble-mindedness and old age. In a way it is a cry of helpless rage. Moreover is it not something worth notice that A. France himself has not escaped the general dominating thought, and at the time when the world was so full of topics of all kinds, he too should have picked out *religion*; after this, let him answer a timid and cautious *yes*, or a ferocious *no*—this is of secondary importance; one thing is sure, the answer does not betray indifference; on the contrary, since the grimace of hatred is only another way of betraying one's concern.

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The preceding authors (except Anatole France) had, only at the end of a long career, said *yes* where they had long said *no*. Let us come to the generation of authors who are now in full power of their talents.

Some represent a transition spirit rejecting the former agnostic attitude of most thinkers but never venturing any positive adhesion to Christianity or Catholicism. André Gide's *La Porte Étroite* (1909) is a good example of that merely negative thought, or Lafon's *L'Elève Gilles*, a novel which was awarded in 1912 the *Grand Prix de Littérature* by the French Academy (translated in English). The author died on the battlefield. The best known of this group, however, is Romain Rolland, the author of *Jean-Christophe*; he attacks the conceit of men of science, and the shallow hunt for something new at any cost concealed under the name of estheticism, and again German industrialism and militarism which dries up the soul, but he is always very cautious and timid: what does Jean Christophe want? *true art*:—what is *true art*? who does *not* want true art? and *true philosophy*? and *true religion*? What is there true or real or positive in the music dreamed and realized by Christophe?

Quite striking are two cases of men who go further than mere hesitation. The brothers J. and J. Tharaud became famous a few years ago by their novel, *Dingley, l'Illustre Ecrivain* (who was Kipling), a novel crowned by the Académie Goncourt. Then they tried various other fields in the note of

realism. In 1913 they struck at last the new religious note and produced one of the remarkable books of these years, *La Tragédie de Ravillac*—i. e., the story of the religious fanatic and insane man who killed Henri IV, the king of France. The idea that prompted them was exactly the same as Barrès's *Colline Inspirée*; and they wrote at the same hour, and they did not know of his book being written, as he did not know of theirs; but the same social or moral causes led to the same result. In a striking page they themselves explain how they were moved to write, namely, because they had still perceived in the madman, although crushed under mountains of fanaticism and superstition and insanity, the divine spark of Catholic faith which stirs all human hearts with a sacred emotion: and this mere spark was beautiful enough to warrant a whole book.

The other case is that of Binet-Valmer, probably a physician who achieved some fame in literature by discussing very freely some wretched types of modern society, perverted types most of the time. He was writing out of mere curiosity, as a dilettante thinker rather amused by the tragedies of his fellowmen. In 1913 (still this year 1913!) he wrote a new novel which betrayed an entirely new man, *La Créature*. A very famous physician, psychiatrist, Dr. Batchano, has been entrusted with an unusually interesting case: a girl who, owing to a neglected education, has developed in her only the physical and animal sides of her nature; nothing human appeals to her; she is all instincts. He succeeds after tremendous care in raising her to the level of human intelligence. But when the work is all done—he realizes (he is forced to realize in watching the behavior of the girl in the world) that his cure is a failure. And gradually he comes to realize too that what she lacks: what he did not give her and what would have made her really human, are the two ideas of Duty and of God. This would be rather commonplace coming from the pen of some other writer: coming from Binet-Valmer, this is a hundred times significant.

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These two novels are sporadic products in the career of their authors. Let us now mention three famous authors who show the Christian and Catholic spirit in their whole work—at least so early in their career that any previous product can be passed over.

One is the lyric poet Francis Jammes, now between forty

and fifty years of age, who was awarded in 1912 the *Grand Prix de Poésie* by the French Academy for his *Géorgiques Chrétiennes*, indisputably the poet of France catering at the present hour to the largest public. He is a son of the sunny south of France, and his books tell his happy enjoyment of the nature of God, of his unsophisticated sharing in the sacraments and rites of the Church, after the years of youth when he was in the darkness.

Here is the Preface of the *Géorgiques Chrétiennes*:

"I repeat once more at the beginning of this new book that I am a Roman Catholic, accepting very humbly all the decisions of my pope S. S. Pius X who speaks in the name of the true God; and that I am no adherer to any schismatic idea, modernism, or other; and that under no pretext shall I deviate from the most uncompromising and from the most beloved dogma, the Roman Catholic dogma. The Roman Catholic dogma is truth itself coming from the very mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ through the medium of his Church. I repudiate in advance any claim on this poem that might be made by ideologs, by philosophers, by reformers."

He has emphasized so much, with the humility of a child, the abdication of his reason in the hands of the Church that some have accused him of pose and mannerism. Suppose there should be some affectation in the expression of his thoughts, which undoubtedly are a shock to our ears still accustomed to the agnostic refrains of a few years ago, why doubt his sincerity? Does not the soldier boast sometimes about his daring deeds—which he has performed none the less? Or does not the scholar often overestimate achievements which even though they do not revolutionize the whole world of thought may be none the less deserving real praise?

The second man is perhaps one of the greatest figures of French literature to-day. People in France have just begun to understand him. Appreciated only by a small élite for some years, he had just scored his second powerful success with the public at large in July, 1914,—the war broke out in August. The acting of his most characteristic play—he is chiefly a playwright—was the theatrical event of the season in Paris, 1913, and it is called—with perfect propriety,—owing to his religious inspiration, "a mystery"; the title is *L'Annonce faite à Marie*. Paul Claudel is in the diplomatic service of France. He started his career in New York and Boston. At the opening of the war he was in Hamburg. His first play (an American play) *L'Echange* is very realistic. But he soon turned to the deep note struck in those years by the author of *Saint Augustin*. The idea of *L'Annonce faite*

à Marie is a revival of the ideal of the saints of the early Church. The way man bears suffering is the touchstone of his mental superiority—or inferiority; he who is visited by severe trial is he who is evidently considered by God worthy of it, is he who will manifest by his fortitude the beauty of a celestial soul; thus a real child of God rejoices in the severest trials because it gives him a chance to manifest divine loftiness in his actions. Violaine the gentle heroine who pays dearly for an act of pure love to a fellow man and who accepts in quiet exaltation the horrid existence of a leper, and whose burning charity is the medium of at least one miraculous deed, stands out indeed as a contrast to all our recent Christian women clamoring for rights to material happiness. One episode explains particularly well the Catholic ideal of Claudel. The scene is laid in France, terribly devastated by the Hundred Years War, and awaiting the liberator, Joan of Arc. The father of Violaine has been remarkably spared; his farm has not been destroyed or pillaged, his family is happy; and *for this very reason* he is filled with uneasiness. How is it that God has not tried *him*? Is he not worthy of it? Is it that he has involuntarily committed some grave sin that God will not give him the chance to show *his* fortitude? How will he appear before the Eternal Judge having no action of courage or resignation to claim which will allow him to take place among those worthy of entering the heavenly Kingdom? And he leaves all behind, wife, children, farm, starts on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; surely he will suffer famine, thirst, sickness; in this way he can give the measure of his moral fortitude, and this will set his conscience at rest.

Another play, *L'Otage*, emphasizes even more this same philosophy.

The third man is the most original. We will just say two words about him, otherwise we would surely spoil the fascinating subject. Charles Péguy died a splendid death in the first days of the war, leading a charge at the Battle of the Marne. This has naturally added to his fame as a moral leader of the intellectual youth of France. In his early years he had followed socialism, but soon was disgusted with what looked to him simply a vulgar system of "sharing the plunder." What has made the greatness of France? He answers: the inspiration of the mediaeval faith, which for years and years we have stupidly studied only in its weak points. Like Claudel he sees the criterion of moral superiority in suffering for a good cause; *justice* he calls it; or devotion to humanity,

to fellow men (—and of course the nearest fellow-men are those of one's own country); and in the crushing also of the unbounded pursuit of subjective pleasure which makes of men brutes, of women devils, and which results in social anarchy. Péguy gets his inspiration from the saintly men and women belonging to the age of the great French cathedrals, and who cultivated "the most beautiful garden of God on earth, France." He evokes with decided partiality these women saints, who finally become, as it were, the three chief deities of his most picturesque theology, *The Virgin Mary*, or *Notre-Dame*, *Sainte Geneviève*, the patron saint of Paris (who saved Paris from the Huns and Attila), and *Joan of Arc*. Why these three holy women? Evidently because women saints impersonate better the fundamental idea of charity, love, devotion. Joan of Arc, he specially honors, because he feels that France is on the eve of a great war, and the Maid of Orleans who fought valiantly was at the same time most kind to her enemies, and suffered extremely at the thought of the miseries of war.

Charles Péguy is difficult to read without preparation. His best known work is *Le Mystère de Jeanne d'Arc*. But probably his *Porche du Mystère de la Deuxième Vertu* (Cahier de la Quinzaine 22 Oct 1911) will be easier to understand,—or some of his verses, a selection of which appeared in 1914 (Ollendorff).

* * *

Now to end this somewhat dry enumeration, we will mention two representatives of the coming generation, so young that they could not have produced any really lasting work, yet who show all the more genuinely, since they are not yet masters of the pen, the inside of their souls. Their books are psychological documents rather than literary monuments. Both owe a part at least of their early fame to their family connections.³

One is the grandson of Pasteur, Robert Valléry-Radot. In his *Homme de Désir* we have no doubt many elements of a psychological autobiography. The hero tells of his education in very Christian surroundings, then how his studies in Paris made him to neglect his soul, then how after having measured the shallowness of human knowledge and art, he tries to get nearer divine life in the solitude of nature; but twice he is tempted by the deceit of terrestrial loves; after the fight that purifies, his soul finally finds celestial peace.

³ For instance, Mauriac, author of *Laure*, is fully the equal of Valléry-Radot in literary skill.

This book is nothing but a new edition, in the twentieth century, of the account of the Temptations of St. Anthony in the Desert; the scenery, the conditions are different, but the struggle against the low instincts conquered by a mystic devotion to God is the same.

Ernest Psichari is the grandson of Ernest Renan, and the religious fanaticism of the new generation as opposed to the dilettantism and scepticism of the great ancestor has been the subject of innumerable comments. Here, let us simply say that Psichari's first novel, *L'Appel des Armes*, has been the book of young unknown writers which has been most discussed and has been most widely read. Psichari tells of the lassitude that men of his age feel concerning mere theories and mere philosophical discussions, and how they want "action"; he chose to be a soldier. His determination to be a soldier is, however, interesting chiefly because he considers his new profession as a sacred mission. *War is divine*—the word is there. But he means that the soldier must be the representative of God's justice on earth, and fight all who use their power to crush the weak. His ideal is that of the Catholic middle-ages, when the Knight made a holy alliance with the Church to establish, even here below, a Kingdom of God. Let us mention the famous prayer which his hero offers in the Church of Cherbourg before going to Morocco to fight the Infidels, as Roland and Charlemagne had gone to fight the Saracens:

"O God give me courage and valiance . . . give me the faith of a soldier. God of the armies, if truly you are present in this consecrated wafer of the Communion, do me the favor of observing that I am not bad, and that I also am worthy to die for an idea. Send me to the distant countries of the Infidels, to the sunny battle-fields, and then give me the bravery of the old soldier. Make me strong, and permit that I may kill many enemies. . . . If you are willing, O Lord, grant me to die in a great victory, and then that I may see Your Splendor in Heaven!"

Psichari was a man of his word. Like Péguy, he died in the war, defending his cannons; he was a captain of artillery. He wrote an autobiography of his conversion which was published after his death under the title *Voyage du Centurion*, in the Christmas number of *L'Illustration* (prefaced by Paul Bourget). It is an enthusiastic and mystic product. There can be doubt whether the author wanted it published in that crude form. But it is a fascinating psychological document.

Just one word by way of conclusion.

The study of such men like Claudel and Péguy, like Valéry-Radot and Psichari, make us understand that the splendid spirit shown by the French youth in the war is no miracle, but is only a normal result of the thoughts and aspirations of the France which was in formation in 1914—a France which has decided to cast aside the enervating so-called artistic dilettantism, and old-fashioned naturalism. The names we have given by no means exhaust the list; they will suffice to show that we have not to deal only with sporadic attempts on the part of writers hoping to score success in sounding once more the religious note.⁴

⁴ This was the theory maintained by Salomon Reinach in the *Revue Sud Américaine* in May, 1914. He would probably write differently now, and no longer speak of "Snobbism." Moreover even if it were snobbism, it means something that the *snobbism* that will succeed is *religious* snobbism.